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At least someone's thinking about state budget reform

State Rep. Mark Gottlieb has proposed a plan to force fiscal discipline on state lawmakers.

Gottlieb, a Republican from nearby Port Washington last week unveiled the "Wisconsin FİRSt Amendment." The FİRSt stands for Fiscal Responsibility and Stability and is designed to create a "rainy day fund" that the state could use to get through economic downturns like the one we are in right now.

The savings account that Gottlieb envisions would be created in "good times," or when state tax collections — income, sales and corporate taxes — exceed 6.5 percent of statewide personal income.

What Gottlieb is trying to do is keep the state — legislators and the governor specifically — from spending excess tax collections on new programs or services. Spending excess tax collections, Gottlieb maintains, creates an unsustainable growth in spending that forces drastic budget cuts or increased taxes when those tax collections fall, as they did when the state and nation fell into recession.

The idea of a rainy day fund is not new. The state has had one for many years, but hasn't had the discipline to keep it fully funded — and even in good economic times, has used the money in it to fund programs or services.

Had Gottlieb's proposal been in effect between the last two economic downturns — from 2003 to 2007 — there would have been \$723.4 million in the rainy day fund, compared to the

\$122 million that was actually there. Because the fund was so low, Gottlieb told The Sheboygan Press editorial board, "We had to slash funding for schools and raise taxes to cover budget shortfalls."

Gottlieb recognizes that the state's budget problems are not solely the responsibility of one party. "Democrats and Republicans have both been fiscally irresponsible" in the last 20 or so years, which has led to current budget problems.

"What I'm trying to do is establish the framework for budget reform and fiscal responsibility," Gottlieb said in his visit to The Press.

Taxpayers, who have seen increases in property taxes as the state has pulled back on revenue sharing and school funding, should be happy that someone is trying to tackle the state's budget mess. Another part of the proposal that taxpayers should like is the provision for tax relief if the rainy day fund exceeds 10 percent of annual tax collections.

Since Gottlieb's plan is an amendment to the state Constitution, it must pass two sessions of the Legislature and then win approval by voters in a statewide referendum.

Whether lawmakers, who haven't been able to exercise fiscal control voluntarily, would be willing to impose it on themselves is subject to debate.

Still, we're happy to see that someone is trying to end the past spending habits that have too often left the state budget in a deep hole.

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